



# Youth Voice in Service-Learning

Source: Points of Light Foundation, 2001, updated February 2008

For additional resources on this and other service-learning topics visit Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at <http://www.servicelearning.org>.

Youth voice refers to the ideas, opinions, involvement and initiatives of people considered to be young. Traditionally “young people” are defined as between the ages of 5-25. In the context of service-learning, it is the input of young people in developing and implementing policies, plans and projects to guide service-learning efforts. Youth voice does not mean youth have ultimate power, it is about respecting the different perspectives and ideas of young people and adults and working together.

## The Importance of Youth Voice

Youth voice benefits young people, adults and organizations. It provides young people with increased self-esteem and sense of personal control; greater development of life skills including leadership, public-speaking, dependability, and job responsibility; less involvement in risky behaviors like drug use and juvenile delinquency; and better academic achievement. It changes how adults view young people (they are more likely to perceive them as critical to organizational improvement), enhances their commitment to the organization, and increases their effectiveness and competency working with youth. For organizations it brings new ideas and energy, helps clarify their mission and increases their connectedness and responsiveness to youth.

## Models for Engaging Youth Voice

There are many different models of youth voice. All models of youth voice incorporate some form of youth/adult partnership, this means adults and young people are working together, sharing power, and learning from each other. No one model is the best model, but different models may work better in certain situations. Below you will find a few commonly used models.

*Youth as Trainers* is a model that stems from the belief that youth who are well trained and supported can design and deliver training about service-learning, or orientation for service-learning projects.

*Youth as Planners* is a model that engages young people in planning and implementing service projects. Youth might help identify community needs, determine objectives, recruit volunteers, develop action plans and timelines, and evaluate the project.

*Youth as Evaluators* allows young people to assess program effectiveness by being involved in the evaluation process. They can develop and implement surveys, conduct interviews and document their findings.

*Youth Summits* bring young people together for discussion and action around issues and concerns important to them. They provide youth an opportunity to voice their concerns and develop solutions.

*Youth Action/Advisory Councils (YAC)* is a group of young people working with an existing organization to keep youth involved in the mission of the organization. YACs help



make decisions, advise, and/or address specific issues.

*Youth As Funders* refers to young people's involvement in philanthropy. This could mean raising money, developing requests for proposals (rfps), reviewing proposals, and determining who gets the money.

*Youth on Board* refers to young people serving on organizational governing structures, especially boards, as a full voting member with all the same place in organizational decision making as other board members.

### **How to Incorporate Youth Voice Into Your Program**

You can't incorporate youth voice without incorporating youth. Start by getting young people involved in small ways with the activities and tasks related to your service-learning project or program. If you have never engaged youth voice in any way it would be difficult to go from no youth involvement to having youth serve on your board. It may be better to start with engaging youth participants in your programs in things like developing a needs assessment or as trainers at an orientation for new participants. You also need to make sure that your organization is ready for youth voice. Talk to staff at your organization about their perceptions and experiences with young people.

### **Preparing Youth to Take on Decision-Making and Leadership Roles**

The best way to prepare youth to take leadership is to provide them with the skills, tools and information they will need to be successful in the role you have identified. If you are engaging young people as evaluators, this may mean spending time talking about what evaluation is, what a survey is, and how to develop one and analyze its data, before actually asking youth to develop a survey for your program. Don't isolate young leaders; let them know they have support and guidance. Remember to communicate clearly with youth, especially the expectations, roles, and responsibilities you and your organization have of them.

### **Tips for Working with Youth**

Here are a few key tips to keep in mind when working with youth:

- Avoid tokenism; asking one or two youth to join a board may make youth intimidated or inadequate to represent all of their peers.
- Listen to youth.
- Be honest with young people (don't say you can do something you can't).
- Maintain a clear system of accountability.
- Give youth meaningful opportunities.
- Provide young people with information, support, and training they need.
- Schedule meetings at times when youth can participate.
- Don't invite youth involvement and then ignore the ideas they give you.

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*For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at*

[http://www.servicelearning.org/instant\\_info/fact\\_sheets/cb\\_facts/youth\\_voice/expanded.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/youth_voice/expanded.php)

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